

The Loss of Specter 22

30 March 1972

David J. Preston

I tried last night to send the accompanying letter (email) in response to your "can you help" notice on the Jolly Green page. I experienced technical difficulties in transmitting but fortunately saved the letter to file. I hope it may prove to be of some help to you. I'm copying to the jolly site with hopes it might be posted. In going over my notes, I compiled the following data regarding the number of aircraft flown during this mission: 7 Jolly Greens (HH-53s), 8 Sandies, 3 Kings (1 tanker, 1 reserve), 11 strike flights (7 expended ordinance), 4 B-66s, 6 F-105s, 13-14 Nail FACs, 3 Raven FACs, 3 Hotels (Air America helicopters), 4 Spectres, 1 Stormy (F-4 Recce/FAC), and other assorted support aircraft.

David J. Preston

Dear Donna,

You are looking for information regarding Spectre 22 and the subsequent rescue of its fifteen crewmembers. I believe I may be able to help in some way. I was the Airborne Mission Commander flying the "King 27" aircraft that fateful night. I say fateful because fate surely played a part in that eventual successful recovery. My crew and I were on rescue alert that night and were scrambled from Korat RTAFB and arrived on scene before midnight. Spectre 01 and Spectre 21 were in the area trying to raise any survivors on rescue radio frequencies. The crash site was in southern Laos in a traditionally hostile location not too far from Saravane. At this time it had not been determined how many had survived. Just one or two nights earlier, another Spectre had been shot down and no one had survived. After gathering as much information from Spectre 21 as I could, Spectre 20 relieved Spectre 21 on scene shortly thereafter and thence began one of the largest and most complex combat rescue operations ever attempted.

We had by this time determined that we had an unknown number of survivors from the 15 crewmember aircraft. (Note: Because most of our rescues involved only one or two crewmembers and were, in themselves, highly complex operations, we in King often questioned our own procedures and preparedness for prosecuting a rescue for a large-crewmember aircraft. As fate would have it, I would be the one to find out.)

After the Spectre had obtained radio contact with some of the survivors and learned that the aircraft had traveled some distance after being hit before they bailed out, I started to plan the on-scene operation assuming that most, if not all, had gotten out of the aircraft and were potential survivors. My objective, at this point, was to facilitate a communication and night visual search for as many as 15

men in preparation for either a night (LNRS) recovery or a first light attempt. We requested multiple Nail FAC (Forward Air Control) aircraft to overfly the target area and attempt communication on each of the four rescue frequencies. Allocating one frequency to each of four Nail FACs as they arrived on scene, we began a night-long process of gathering information and searching and eventually obtained radio contact with all 15 crewmembers. Since the on- scene time was limited for each FAC by his fuel endurance, a cycling of aircraft was necessary and replacement aircraft/crews had to enter the subject area to continue the operation after being briefed by myself or my crewmembers and by the Nail crew they were replacing.

Concurrently, we had obtained fighter-bomber resources to orbit awaiting a possible need to deliver ordinance on enemy forces which might compromise the safety of the survivors. As the night progressed and more survivor locations were determined, SAR forces (Jollys and Sandies) were launched from NKP and DaNang in case pickup attempts could be made before first light utilizing LNRS (Limited Night Recovery System) techniques (night vision goggles). Because of the scope of this rescue operation, all airborne resources--SAR, fighter-bombers, FACs, fast FACs, recce and others were made available for this mission. Additionally, Air America helicopter resources were volunteered and made ready.

We determined that two survivors had exited the aircraft shortly after it was hit and they were located approximately 40 miles east of the main congregation of survivors. I assigned FAC support to this secondary SAR area to determine as much information as possible. Now we had, in effect, a SAR within a SAR--a situation which sometimes arose because of a loss of an aircraft engaged in a rescue mission and the ensuing need to rescue those crewmembers in addition to the original objectives. Surely a situation to avoid if at all possible because of the complicating factors and greatly increased difficulty in maintaining coordination, command and control of two simultaneous rescue operations. Since the threat to the two survivors at the secondary location was unknown, I decided that as long as their situation was stable, I would concentrate the search and rescue efforts in the area with 13 known survivors and delay the east side pickups until the primary area recovery operations were underway. By doing this, I hoped to avoid complications which would ensue if the east side recovery went bad; i.e. hostile fire, loss of rescue aircraft, discovery of survivors location by the enemy etc. Since everything appeared to be relatively quiet in that area, compared to the enormity of the operation on the west side, I felt that we couldn't risk a loss of control at any point.

After the night-long efforts and the utilization of well over 100 aircraft--including every SAR aircraft in Southeast Asia--at first light the primary scene Jollies and Sandies began their coordinated efforts to pickup the 13 men located on the west side. It soon became apparent that the men were more closely grouped together than originally thought. Our carefully laid out plans to divide up the survivors to different Jolly/Sandy teams quickly unravelled as soon as one Jolly started a run-in for a hover over a known location for a survivor, another survivor would make his presence known in the near vicinity by radio transmission and this would happen

again and again until all 13 men were safely picked up by at least four different Jollies. Because of this and the date, it truly was an Easter Egg Hunt.

At the same time that the main rescue force was initiating their recoveries, I released the east side resources to prosecute pickups of the B and M crewmembers. The east side resources consisted of two Air America helicopters, a Raven FAC and a Nail FAC. Also Sandy 1 & 2 were there for the pickups. Since we had purposely kept this location as quiet as we could through the night, we had not drawn a lot of attention from enemy forces in this area. Just prior to the pickup attempts, one of the survivors reported vehicle activity and a man walking up a road not far from his location. Some ordinance was laid down on the road between the two survivors. Hotel 45 and Hotel 59 (Air America) each planned to pickup one of the survivors to minimize hover time in the area. The pickups were made successfully and those east-side resources began their egress to the west. Hotel 45 picked up the B man and Hotel 59 picked up the M crewmember at 0928 local time. This completed the successful recovery of all 15 crewmembers.

What had taken place that night of March 30-31, 1972 took its place as the largest successful aircrew recovery of the entire war. A day or two later, the renowned Bat 21 rescue operation commenced on Easter Sunday. It too was a very large, but prolonged rescue and recovery--and resulted in the eventual rescue of but one survivor and the loss of one Jolly Green with all aboard. A book was written about that mission which later was made into a movie (a poor representation of the professionalism and extensive resources employed by those who served in the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service and other supporting groups--Special Operations).

Donna, I offer my sincere condolences to you and your children for your loss. I have never met any of those men from Spectre 22, nor from any of the numerous other rescue missions in which I participated, with the exception of Lt. Col Hambleton, the subject of the Bat 21 operation. I wish I could have met your husband. Who knows the cumulative effects of combat flying and the effect of at least one terror-filled night alone in the jungle which he experienced. Be assured though, he was a very important man, as was any man unfortunate enough to become the object of a rescue mission in Southeast Asia. Scores of military men have risked, and many have lost their lives in such missions. No expense was ever spared to save just one man and that's why I'm extremely proud to have experienced, firsthand, the bravery and dedication of all those who served that cause--especially the Jolly, Sandy, Air America and FAC crews.

Just one final note in regard to your questions. In the letter designations assigned to each crewmember of a multi-crewmember aircraft, A is assigned to the aircraft commander, B to the copilot, C to the navigator and so on through the crew list. The two survivors which were picked up on the east side were B and M which indicates that one was the copilot and the other was a crewmember in the rear of the aircraft. I don't know what crew position your husband was but perhaps that will

answer one of your questions. To answer another of your questions, the Air America helicopters transferred their survivors to one of the Jollies for their delivery back to Ubon. If a copy of the flight orders could be located from Spectre records, you could determine the name of the B and M crewmembers. My notes from the mission indicate a broken leg suffered only by the N crewmember who was picked up on the west side. Others suffered various neck and back injuries.

I hope that this has been of some help to you. Through the years, I often thought that a book written about the Spectre 22 mission would present some kind of closure for me but life has been too busy to do all the necessary preparations and story gathering. I am copying this letter to the Jolly Green bulletin board with hopes that someone involved in that mission and others might share what information and recollections they may have--Ken Ernst, Dale Stovall, Super-Sandy Randy Jaynes--where are you?

Sincerely,
David J. Preston
King2721@aol.com

[Pacific Stars and Stripes](#) Article on the rescue.